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ABSTRACT

Findings of this ethnographic study are the product of observations of the Capital Area School Board from January until September 1976. The data were fit into two models, the Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy and the elite-arena model. "Elite" boards reach most decisions in private meetings and feel independent of the electorate. "Arena" boards debate issues publicly and see themselves as delegates of the people. Often during arena behavior of school boards, the board suffers high turnover and superintendents are not reelected. This study attempts to explain how superintendents manage to remain in office during such stormy periods. During the period described by the study a new superintendent promoted the abolition of elite behavior and the institution of arena behavior. Because of a split in the board, board meetings were full of conflict and turnover was high, yet the superintendent retained support. Researchers concluded that a superintendent may survive in conflict situations if the superintendent values arena behavior, separates administration from policy-making, administers policy enacted, and keeps separate from board factions. It was suspected that when board members do not value their own arena behavior, the conflicts will tend to be personalized and unmanageable. (Author/JM)

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COMMUNITY CONFLICT AND SCHOOL BOARD RESPONSE

A Study of Superintendent Survival

by
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Presented at The American Anthropology Association Annual Meeting in Los Angeles, California, November 17, 1978

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Note: The participant observer data reported here were collected by Nicholas Knisley as part of his doctoral program at The Pennsylvania State University.

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Introduction

To do ethnography is difficult enough. To write a paper, of less than 20 pages, presenting that research and its implications is certainly impossible. I would much prefer to undertake the difficult task of the complete ethnography than the impossible task of this report. However, unlike the old motto, in this case the impossible will have to be undertaken immediately--the difficult will take a while.

Method of Study

Observations of the Capital Area School Board were made for a twenty-one month period. This was broken into two distinct periods. From January until September, 1976, observations were made of regular school board meetings by a person who had been a high school principal in the district and was presently a full-time student at the university. On September 1, 1976, this person returned to the district, as an assistant superintendent and continuously observed in the district (as a participant observer) until September 1, 1977. All board meetings including "working sessions" were observed during that period. Also regular informal interactions with board members and central office administrators, as well as others in the school district were recorded in a participant observer diary. The notes from these observations were periodically reviewed and validated against board minutes and newspaper articles with an external nonparticipant researcher. These data were then set in an historical context supplied by the records of the district, minutes of meetings from the previous five years, and the data gathered from interviews of the board members by the participant observer.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the data will be viewed through two models. The first, The Dissatisfaction Theory of Democracy (Lutz and Iannaccone, 1978) suggests that when there is sufficient dissatisfaction within a school district, a political upheaval occurs behaviorally characterized by: incumbent school board member defeat, superintendent turnover, and followed by public policy change, bringing public policy more in line with the values and demands of the electorate. This process of conflict forces the school board out of its traditional pattern of elite council behavior and into a more arena council behavior. This requires the second framework, the elite-arena model suggested by Bailey (1966).

Elite councils tend to: (1) think of themselves as separate from and trustees for the people; (2) reach consensus in private meetings; and (3) inact these decisions in public by unanimous vote. Arena councils tend to: (1) think of themselves as community in council and as delegates of the people; (2) debate issues publically and vigorously; and (3) reach decision by split-majority votes in public session. It has previously been suggested that the vast majority of school boards prefer to operate in elite fashion and are ill at ease when forced to arena type behaviors (Lutz, 1975). This was confirmed by Witmer (1976). Thus, it seemed that it was during the longer periods of elite council behavior that conflict was at its low point in school districts and superintendents remained in office (being reelected by their boards). During the infrequent periods of arena council behavior when conflicts broke into the open, school board members

turned over, and superintendents were not reelected. The Robertsdale District ethnography (Iannaccone and Lutz, 1970) first suggested this series of events. It remains necessary to explain how school superintendents manage to remain in office during periods of arena council behavior and school board member turnover. It is to this question that the present study addresses itself.

Lutz and Iannaccone (1978) suggest that when the school district's population is heterogeneous in nature, has differing values and needs, they will tend to be satisfied with the local school board when it is more nearly arena in type. Under such circumstances, when a superintendent behaves in delegate fashion, keeps himself separate from any faction of the arena council, feels that the public debate and arena action is helpful, and sees his administrative function as separate from the board's policy function, he/she should be best able to survive the types of conflict generated. The data provided by the ethnography, from which this report is generated, should help modify and ground that speculation, providing some testable hypotheses.

Brief Historical Description of the School District

Capital School District is located in northeastern United States along the western bank of the Franklin River. Directly across that river, but not part of the school district, lies the state capital from which the district takes its name. Although the area has been inhabited for more than 175 years and has operated public schools continuously during that time, the present district is only about ten years old. In 1966, a final consolidation took place culminating a sixty year period of mergers

and consolidations, establishing the present Capital School District. The District is presently comprised of five boroughs, two townships, and part of another township, all lying within the political boundries of two different counties. In some ways the various areas cherished their distinctiveness as indicated by the fact that in all areas of municipal government (except public education) merger, although frequently discussed, had not been accomplished and informed observers believe it is not likely.

The Capital Area School Board was composed of nine members, three elected from each of three regions. One person was elected from each region every two years (for six year terms). Thus, every two years three members stood for election, assuring that at least six experienced incumbents would remain on the board after any single election, regardless of the outcome for incumbents.

The nine members of the Capital Area board remained constant during the entire period of observation, with one exception. The vice-president resigned his office two months before data collection ended, but was not replaced before observations were concluded.

School Board and Superintendent Turnover

During the nine year period, September 1969 to September 1977, only one member of the board had served continuously as a board member. A total of twelve members had either resigned or been defeated at the polls. One had actually been defeated but three others had privately admitted that their resignations were, at least in part, precipitated by the feeling that they would have had a very difficult task had they attempted reelection. Of the nine member board which elected the former superintendent Harrel in 1969, only three remained on the board when he was replaced in 1973. Although

Harrel had resigned, most board members agreed that he would not have been reelected "under any circumstances." Many people felt he had been the cause of most of the district's problems; as one board member stated, "He was the wrong man, in the wrong place, at the wrong time." Of the nine-member board which accepted Harrel's resignation and elected the present superintendent Williams in 1973, only the president, Luther, remained on the board at the end of data collection in 1977 and he confided that he wanted to quit because, "It's getting to me!" He did resign about one year after the end of data collection.

The New Superintendent

Dr. Williams has been described as looking like a "Brooks Brothers ad." His full head of white hair, steel gray eyes, and sharp features present him as a "picture administrator."

Williams saw it as his responsibility to completely inform the board, provide them with alternatives, recommendations and data. Further, he wanted to engage the board in open discussions of such alternatives and recommendations. To this end he had recommended that the board abandon its practice of handling things by committee, a practice which had resulted in "rubber stamp" approval of committee recommendations (made in private session) by the board in public session. A former board member described this former procedure as, "I'll support your report, if you support mine." Williams' recommendation (with the support of a state "Sunshine Act") was adopted by the board, forcing it into arena behavior to settle disputes.

Other changes in the decision making structure also came about under Williams' strong leadership. The total upper echelon of decision makers in

the district were replaced or reshuffled. The directors of elementary and secondary education were replaced with a single assistant superintendent (a new person). Both high school principals had been replaced (with new people) and there were five new board members. At the time of the study all but one of the nine board members were favorably impressed with Williams and stated this fact in interviews and questionnaires used in the study.

The Generalized Conflict Situation

As one might suspect, based on the previous account of the provincial composition of the district, many of the controversies with the Capital Area Board took the form of a split between the northern and southern counties in the school district, each served by separate high schools having their roots in the separate school districts existing prior to the 1966 consolidation. An issue with sectional overtones erupted during the first observation that occurred in data collection.

At the regular board meeting of January 8, 1976, held at the Briar Crest High School (in the north area), 500 residents were in attendance to support the tranfer of students from overcrowded New Cresson High (in the south) to Briar Crest High. In addition to the natural barrier, a tributary of the Franklin River which divided the North-South Counties, dissimilarity in socio-economic status and school achievement set them apart.

After a two hour give and take session with the public, the board split 4-4 on the matter, thus failing to support the public's petition. The vote was clearly drawn according to regional lines within the board with the dissentors claiming that such a move would only serve to overcrowd

Briar Crest as well as New Cresson. Much of what was to follow in the next year and a half (although not always so totally drawn along regional lines) was foretold by the events of this night.

A Focused Ethnography

As noted earlier, it is impossible to provide "thick description" (see Geertz, 1973) in a short report. Therefore, a conscious decision is made here to surrender thick description and briefly tell the story of how a school superintendent survived the type of political conflict that has previously been demonstrated to lead to superintendent turnover. Instead of the fourteen course dinner provided for a reader by ethnography, only a dish of tempting appetizers is served here. This limited look into the world of ethnography is referred to here as focused ethnography for it deliberately selects from among the hundreds of pages of data in the thick description. Those data however suggest the particular subplot that is the focus of present interest and provides an opportunity for this analysis of limited intent.

Williams at Bat

There is an "old saw" about the superintendent who was hospitalized. The board sent a telegram stating, "The Board wishes you a speedy recovery--by a vote of 5-4"! Issues like this were in constant evidence in Capital Area, but not directly involving the superintendent. For instance, on July 22 the board conducted a 4 1/2 hour meeting where 44 percent of the votes on decisions were non-unanimous. There were many heated discussions including a postponement of the discussions about realigning the areas in

the district from which board members were selected. Administrative salaries (for administrators other than Superintendent Williams) were approved 5-3, and the motion suggested by Williams to commend those administrators for their "quality performance" failed to get approval by a 4-4 vote. Yet the motion to approve Williams' salary raise was unanimously approved 8-0. Often issues that could not be resolved because of a 4-4 tie (less than 10 percent of the board meetings were attended by all nine board members--six and eight were usual) had to be resolved by proposing a second motion indicating the action, policy or appointment was to be only temporary. Such a motion would likely pass 5-3 or 6-2 only to be reconsidered at a later date.

Regularly Williams allowed others to take the lead at public board meetings. Reports to the board were prepared by subordinate administrators and positions about the proposal taken and debated by board members. Williams did not participate in board meetings as an equal with board members or in the role of policy maker. His efforts to exercise leadership were informal and low keyed. His public role was clearly one of the administrator for the board who carried out the policy of the board, once it was decided by the board majority. The single exception seems to be his assumption of the role of chief negotiator for the board in contract negotiations with the teachers and in this function he studiously reported regularly to the board as a whole and in negotiations took the role of acting for the board.

Board Members As They Saw Themselves

Although the conflict clearly split along sectional lines, the board members themselves often tended to personalize the conflict. On September 24, the vice president of the board told one school administrator, ". . . board members are after each other, not the staff or administration." Shortly after the president confided, "I'm beginning to think only a few of us on the board and a handful of the administration are interested in the district anymore. Maybe we ought to consider the ramifications of two districts again"--an option not likely to meet with state approval at that time.

All of this conflict resulted in some reassessment by board members of the "worth" of board membership (and perhaps the unlikelihood that some members could be reelected). One board member reported, "Who needs all this? It used to be fun to serve, but now--all we do is haggle each other. I have enough trouble on my job and I don't need more of the same as a board member." This discontent led to very low attendance at meetings and, with the constant split votes on policy issues, an inability to conduct business when a majority of the total board was required. The situation became so bad that the newspaper suggested a New Year's resolution for board members to attend meetings. Only three of the 43 meetings observed were attended by all board members at the same time.

While the perception of conflict often focused on individuals it was certainly based in sectionalism. During the data collection period, the board had the opportunity to change the election process from a sectional matter to an "at large" election. Even here the board split but went on

record as opposing an "at large" type election and finally approved a new sectional arrangement for electing board members by a vote of 8-0.

Still the focus of the conflict alternated between the sectionalism and individual dislikes board members had for each other. At the dedication of the south county high school addition on March 6, 1977, the president of the board publically noted in his speech, "Those individuals [board members] who would intentionally attempt to divide the Capital Area School District do a great disservice to the Board, the students and the entire school community. I think it's very enlightening to observe that the one individual who seems to be the force behind the division efforts is not in attendance today."

When a project to expand the New Castle elementary building in the south county came before the board, a south county board member, rather than accepting the population figures presented in support of the project, sought figures from the State Education Department. A member from the north county asked angrily, "Who gave you license to act as a spokesman for this board with the State Education Department? You have no mandate to go over there, so stay away. We have enough trouble with the State and you will just cause us more trouble." Another south county member responded supporting his colleague and obviously in reference to the north county Blair Crest addition project, "Don't sweat this small stuff, what's a million or so?" The north county board member retorted, "The New Castle project has nothing to do with what was done in Blair Crest, so why beat a dead horse?," and the south county member growled, "Because the 'dead horse' cost this district a pretty penney, that's why!" Thus individuals and sectionalism appeared to be one in the same matter.

Obviously there was considerable mistrust, of both motives and behavior between the two board groups. During a sharp verbal dispute about the construction of a new addition to an elementary school in the south county (which again split along sectional lines) one board member asked a member of the opposition, "Don't you trust this Board's motives?" The member usually in the minority, and from the poorer south county did not answer yes or no, but stated simply he wanted a "definite commitment" to build the addition to the south county school. The paper reported, "The bone in the throat of [these members] is their fear, if not belief, that the . . . North County Directors will give Timber Ridge [residents] the short end of the stick every chance they get."

Perhaps the situation is best summed up by an exchange between board members during the July 14, 1977, meeting. One director objected to a report which he felt ". . . calls specific attention to the political or, better stated, social split between Blair Crest [North] and Timber Ridge [South]. Another member defended the report stating, "Why not? It's a fact of life whether we like it or not. There's no use trying to hide it because it's always there. We'll just have to learn to live with it, work around it . . . ."

But apparently the board as a whole was unable to accept it, live with it, or work around it. The members never liked the arena debates or split votes, constantly objecting to the "hassel" and the questionable motives of other board members. And arena does describe the board of Capital Area. Of the 970 votes observed, 223 or 23 percent, were non-unanimous. This is more than three times the percent non-unanimous votes observed during the

high conflict period in the Robertsdale District (Iannaccone and Lutz, 1969). Observing the New York City Board of Education for a period of three years, Lutz, Lousdale and Bloland (1970) report, "Lack of public consensus . . . was the exception rather than the rule." Yet Superintendent Williams was apparently able to live with it and work around it. And he was able to describe the manner in which he accomplished that feat. On March 22, 1977, he noted, "In my almost four years in the District, I am finding that the Board takes most of the heat from the public . . . . When provincial issues arise we had better take a low profile and keep out of it."

Epilogue

In October 1978, following the end of data collecting in September 1977, the board president resigned--just prior to the November election. At the first meeting, after the new appointment, Williams' "right hand man" (the person appointed to replace the old elementary and secondary curriculum people) failed to have his contract continued (by a 4-4 vote). If Williams is able to view this loss as "just another administrator" (as he had in the past) and remain free of the controversy, he will likely continue to survive. But here is the first negative board action to hit so close to home. If Williams embroils himself in "initiatory leadership" to save his first important appointment he may well become a casualty to the political conflict which so often results in superintendent turnover.

Analysis and Conclusions

The Capital Area School Board during the data collection period was certainly well toward the arena end of the elite-arena council continuum.

They had probably been driven to that extreme due to the sectional feelings so prevalent in the district. It, however, could have been the conflict that produced and resulted in the arena behavior, rather than the reverse. In any case the arena behavior operationalized the conflict so far as the school board was concerned and made it public.

As our model suggests, the public felt they were represented by their elected officials and the board members felt obligated to represent their geographic constituencies. They did not generally view themselves as separate from the people but as direct delegates of those different constituencies. Further, there was agreement among board members and among those whom they represented about this sectional representation. This perception was widely shared in the community as demonstrated by the newspaper's identification of the conflict situation. The board, however, did not seem happy with their roles as delegates. Unlike the arena councils of state and federal legislatures they did not respect each other as representatives of differing values and needs. Quite to the contrary they tended to dislike one another and often seemed to be "after each other." Thus the conflict emerged, not about differing alternatives, but usually personalized and, in Coser's (1965) terms, "unrealistic" and difficult if not impossible to solve short of disposing of the individuals who appeared to be the heart of the conflict. Thus, as predicted, there was considerable school board turnover. While impossible to indicate, based on the data, it is likely that turnover of school board members would not have been so frequent if the board itself had better accepted its arena behavior.

Superintendent Williams, however, seemed to value the public debate and the board's arena behavior. He was never heard to condemn it and, in fact, initiated it when he recommended the abolishment of the standing committees which had formally been used as the places where consensus had been privately negotiated. Additionally, he kept himself aloof from the conflict. As suggested by the arena model, he kept administration separate from the arena policy decision making process. He was not "part" of the board or either of its factions. When "provincial issues" arose he took "a low profile and [kept] out of it." In short he acted as the delegate for the board and administered the policy decision enacted by the majority vote of the arena board.

While the board seemed divided on most important issues that came before them, they did not seem divided about Williams. They enacted his raise by unanimous (8-0) vote. Therefore, Williams survived the incumbent defeat-superintendent turnover cycle demonstrated at the 0.01 level of confidence and described in the literature. The circumstances of such a survival are documented for the first time in this report and contribute to the Dissatisfaction Theory research in the politics of education.

Conclusions

1. When the school district is heterogeneous in nature, the electorate will value arena behavior in their school board.
   a) When, however, the board members do not value their own arena behavior, the conflicts will tend to be personalized and conflict will become unrealistic and difficult to manage.

b) Under such circumstances, board turnover will less likely be a result of incumbent defeat (for the electorate is relatively pleased with their delegates) but more likely be a result of resignation due to the personal conflict and unhappiness of the individual board members.

2. Given the above situation it will be difficult to estabish a new equilibrium on the board. Board membership will continue to change and conflict will continue to be high.

3. Under such conditions a superintendent may survive if he/she:

   a) is personally supportive of and values the arena behavior of the board and the public debate and public nature of policy making.

   b) remains aloof from the direct policy making process.

   c) keeps the administrative process as separate from the policy making process.

   d) acts as a delegate for the arena board administering the policy as enacted by the board's majority vote.

   e) keeps separate from the council and does not become identified with any of its separate factions.

4. It is suggested that the most likely error such an administrator may make is to finally attempt a vigorous defense of a recommendation previously made and passed by the majority of the board but presently reversed by the present majority due to a shift in the composition of the board.

   a) It is not unlikely that such a situation will deal with a personnel decision.

   b) The shift will be along sectional lines and be seen as a "win" for the group previously in the minority and now the new majority.

c) The administrator's defense of the old situation and opposition to the new decision will probably be viewed by the new majority as a defense of the opposition and alignment with that opposing faction.

d) As that faction is now in the minority, such an error could cost the administrator his/her job.

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